



Ji, pianist

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Classical pianist Ji: Making musical connections

Michael James Rocha | San Diego Union-Tribune | January 18, 2016



Classical pianist Ji performs Sunday as part of the La Jolla Music Society's Discovery Series. *Christian Steiner*

Good performers entertain the audience, while great performers make them feel. Classical pianist Ji considers it a job well done when he falls in the latter.

"It's a performer's job to break that wall between the audience and the performer," he said. "I don't go out of my way to do it, but I wear everything on my sleeve. Making myself vulnerable on stage, as a result, makes people feel something.

"If someone comes up to me after a performance and says, 'I can't pinpoint what it was, but I felt something,' then that's when I know I did my part."

At 24 – he turns 25 on Jan. 26 – Ji is doing everything he can to preserve classical music and introduce it to young audiences. But don't get him wrong: He doesn't think classical music is a dying breed at all.

"First and foremost, people keep saying that the industry is dwindling and facing rough times," Ji said by phone recently while walking around his hometown of New York City. "History tells us that that mentality has been prevalent since Bach's time.

"I think that it's an ongoing vicious cycle where people think classical music's popularity is on the decline," said Ji, who performs here Sunday, making his La Jolla Music Society debut as part of its Discovery Series. "I take – I accept – the responsibility to fight and prove people otherwise. Classical music is never going away. We live in very modern world, and it's our job to live in the moment, but it's also our job to respect and preserve the tradition."

Classical music, Ji said, "transcends everything, and it gives me an outlet ... a way to talk about things that words cannot describe. It excites me to share my approach to music and hope people can relate on some level."



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An award-winning international musician, Ji has been sharing his approach to music since he was 5, when he first started playing the piano. Raised in a musically inclined family — his mother ran a music school in Korea — Ji said playing the piano “was something that spoke to me. It drew me in at such a young age.” At 9, he relocated with his family to New York, where he attended the Music Preparatory Division of the Mannes College and later, the Pre-College Division at The Juilliard School.

These days, he’s devoted to spreading his gospel. He’s a superstar back in his native South Korea and was featured last summer in the August issue of *Esquire Korea*. He is an ardent spokesperson for classical music and knows how to use the power of the medium.

“I’m a firm believer in showing people that yes, I play music that’s been around for hundreds of years, but I’m not stuck in the past. I’m very much aware of my surroundings and find a way to bridge the two. It’s all about finding a balance.”

Outside of music, there’s also that constant search for the “yin and yang,” he said. “Balance has always been elusive since I was young. When you’re always on the go — in my case, performing — you try very hard to find balance. As an homage to my incessant need for balance, I was bored one day in history class and drew a face and an eye in the shape of the yin and yang symbol.” That ended up becoming the design for two tattoos: on the inside of his right arm, the yang side, and on the inside of left arm, the yin.

Rebellious streak aside, Ji is all about his music — something that’s been a part of him his entire life. He’s been recognized around the world, performing as a soloist with the Toronto Symphony, Bangor Symphony, Nashville Symphony and Charlotte Philharmonic, among many others. In 2012, he was the first prize winner in the Young Concert Artists International Auditions. In 2010, he collaborated with Korean pop artist Tae Jung Kim to bring classical music to the streets of Seoul. He also has two CDs under his belt: “Bach Exhibition” and “Lisztomania.”

For someone with such talent and drive, does he still get nervous?

“Oh, I still get nervous,” he said, laughing. “I always think, though, that there’s a fine line between feeling secure and assured and the nerves that come in right before you go on stage — that’s what generates the magic in terms of spontaneity and being lost in the music. Without that kind of nerves, there’s no magic, so I welcome it.

“Before I go out on stage, I do a lot of breathing exercises to get in tune with my body. It’s a very physical thing, playing the piano. I try to put my mind in an athletic perspective. Once I go out, I take a breath and ground myself to the chair and make sure everything is aligned properly and we take off. The moment I do that is when the magic happens ... when you break that wall.”